



## **Sinéad O'Donnell: Aesthetic encounters, the maternal/performative/laughing body and a matrixial response-ability to the other.**

Driver, C. (2019, Feb 1). Sinéad O'Donnell: Aesthetic encounters, the maternal/performative/laughing body and a matrixial response-ability to the other. Millennium Court Arts Centre.

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

### **Publication Status:**

Published (in print/issue): 01/02/2019

### **Document Version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

### **General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via Ulster University's Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### **Take down policy**

The Research Portal is Ulster University's institutional repository that provides access to Ulster's research outputs. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact [pure-support@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:pure-support@ulster.ac.uk).

# Crossing Permissions



Sinéad O'Donnell

First published in 2019 by Millennium Court Arts Centre

Millennium Court Arts Centre  
William Street,  
Portadown,  
Co. Armagh,  
N.Ireland.  
BT62 3NX

info@millenniumcourt.org  
www.millenniumcourt.org

Copyright © for text: remains with the authors.  
Copyright © for images: remains with the artist.  
Copyright © for the exhibition: Millennium Court Arts Centre.

ISBN 978-0-9928266-3-5

This book was published on the occasion of the exhibition *Crossing Permissions* by Sinéad O'Donnell 2019, which took place at Millennium Court Arts Centre from 1st February until 27th March 2019.

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of Millennium Court Arts Centre.

Design by Johnny Cordner.

Printed in Belfast by Minprint.

Edited by Sarah McAvera.

The writers and all the images listed in the *List of illustrations* (p33) are hereby identified as the authors and illustrators of this work in accordance with section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. The authors, artist and Millennium Court Arts Centre have asserted their moral rights.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not by way of trade or otherwise be circulated without the publisher's consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on any subsequent publisher.

# Contents

Introduction	4
Dr. Chérie Driver, <i>Sinéad O'Donnell: Aesthetic encounters, the maternal/performative/laughing body and a matrixial response-ability to the other.</i>	6
Art Center Ongoing, artist in residency programme, Tokyo, Japan.	15
Centro de Exposiciones Subte, Montevideo, Uruguay.	18
Peras de Olmo - Ars Continua, artist in residency programme, Buenos Aires, Argentina.	22
ATIOL, artist in residency programme, Campinas, Brazil.	24
Undisclosed Territories # 11, Solo, Indonesia. 2018.	28
List of illustrations	33
Acknowledgments	34



## Introduction

*Crossing permissions* is the title that I used to describe a process. A process that was like an unravelling of self, art, and others through, or driven by, feminist feelings through my performance practice. The process looked at my practice and the wider world of art that I placed myself within. As a project, *Crossing Permissions*, for me, was about mutual exchange: living and working alongside women in Argentina, Brazil, Japan, Thailand and Uruguay and Indonesia; I shared my stories and they shared theirs. In each of these countries the permissions differed from culture to culture, community to community, artist to artist, woman to woman.

Through the year and residencies I saw commonalities across the continents of women silenced, women mistreated, women uncomfortable in their bodies and shamed by their femininity, women trapped by their reproductive ability or shamed for their inability. I have tried not just to give a voice to all of these concerns, but to give an empowering voice.

My performances have a history of giving a voice to women or subjects that have been stifled and prevented from being heard. I have not always been heard. I have dyslexia and I have been trapped by my inability to share what's in my head in a coherent way that can be understood by those outside. Performing allows me to present an exchange of ideas in a non-verbal way that transcends language.

A book about a year-long project was always going to be a challenge for me, but I have approached it in the same way that I approach my work, in a spirit of sharing and collaboration. Dr. Chérie Driver has written an essay seeking to place my work within a theoretical context and other shorter texts describing my performances have come from women in the various cities that I performed. While it is true that this project could not have happened without the support of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and their major award, it is also true that this project could not have happened without the kindness, support and collaboration of women across the continents. Thank you.





## *Sinéad O'Donnell: Aesthetic encounters, the maternal/performative/laughing body and a matrixial response-ability to the other.*

Dr Chérie Driver, Lecturer in Art Theory at Belfast School of Art, January 8, 2019.

My first encounter with this work was a recent Lecture by Sinéad O'Donnell at the Fine Art Artists Lecture Series at the Belfast School of Art.<sup>1</sup> *Crossing Permissions* is a body of work made by O'Donnell across a year of residencies in Tokyo (January - March 2018), Montevideo (June 2018), Buenos Aires (July 2018), Brazil (August 2018), back to Tokyo (September 2018), Thailand (October 2018) and Indonesia (November 2018). As the lecture unfolded a reading of the work began to emerge with theorisations of feminine sexual difference as something represented beyond the phallic structuring of meaning and language, a thinking through the maternal as a co-existing with(in) another being as embodied radical and ethically knowledge,<sup>2</sup> and my own personal experiences of pregnancy and co-existing with(in), birthing and traumatic loss. This was a very visceral, powerful and traumatizing aesthetic encounter with the physical and bodily gestures of a naked body, a defiant and powerful body, a menstruating body, a pregnant body, a hemorrhaging body, an interconnecting, permeable and leaky body all invoked in the performance documentation. There is a critical dialogue and a seepage between the material and bodily realness of the work and the theoretical and political discourses it is investigating and interrogating. Unequivocally concurrent through all the performance art works is an endeavour and commitment to create a space to open *new current landscapes of femininity* to challenge controlling and regulating systems of the female body, and to speak from an intersubjective, ethical and responsible space of being, being together and connectedness. It is from these seeds of aesthetic and theoretical encounters along a matrixial theorization<sup>3</sup> and maternal bodily corporeality planted on that day from which some of these considerations have been grown. Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger defines this field in her practice and theorisations and argues that;

*Femininity, I propose, transforms from within what it means to be a subject, for it is the kernel of ethical being, the ultimate measure of the ethical relationship: 'it is that human possibility which consists in saying that the life of another human being is more important than my own.'<sup>4</sup> The kernel of subjectivity, its knowledge and its sense, its vulnerability and its ethical standing, are conditioned by the difference of the feminine, which therefore cannot remain so utterly Other. The feminine now becomes a subjectivity that makes signs and gives meaning, even if language fails to formulate it in clear-cut concepts.<sup>5</sup>*

This text is an opportunity to consider with further critical depth this complex and powerful body of work by O'Donnell through this critical feminist psychoanalytic and theoretical lens of Ettinger. As well as the lecture, the work has been encountered through video and photographic documentation, material objects from the performances, drawings, discussions with the artist and written accounts by women writers and artists in the host locations. This body of work can also be seen against the seismic social and political context of the Appeal the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment Campaign and Referendum in the Republic of Ireland during that year, the ongoing legal challenges in Northern Ireland for equality on Abortion Rights with women in other parts of UK and a high-profile rape case broadcast across the

<sup>1</sup> 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2018, Ulster University, Belfast.

<sup>2</sup> Rosemary Betterton, *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 2014, 8.

<sup>3</sup> The basis of the theorization particularly the work presented here around Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger have been drawn from my PhD research as follows; *The writings of Griselda Pollock, Ireland, the 'feminine' and visual representation*, Theses (University of Ulster). Ph.D. 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Levinas and Ettinger, 1993: 9 in Ettinger, Bracha Lichtenberg. "Woman – Other – Thing: A matrixial\* touch." *Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger: Matrix – Borderlines*. Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1993, 11-18.

<sup>5</sup> Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger "Weaving a Woman Artist With-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event" *Theory, Culture & Society* 21.1 (2004): 84.



media from the Laganside Courthouse in Belfast. Scarves in one of the three Suffragette colours – green, white and violet – from the mass-participation artwork *Processions*<sup>6</sup>, are also intermittently woven as material objects in the body of work. Equally important across this year is the traumatizing impact of domestic violence on women’s lives evidenced in many of the interactions with women across the residencies. This essay will focus in briefly on two work’s by O’Donnell to show it as a highly negotiated encounter of the body in action and how it speaks to a set of aesthetic, critical and theoretical concerns about the politics of representation, the possibility of knowledge ‘in, of and from the feminine’<sup>7</sup> through an aesthetic dialogue between the body and language, and how it speaks to and brings attention to women’s lives and their ongoing fight for equality and human rights across the globe.

Gender operates along a binary division of male and female that determines and regulates all aspects of human experience and knowledge, privileging male over female. Hierarchical and in opposition the female is in the negative and is inferior, always defined in relation to the other. Gender in an anthropological sense is a set of meanings that sexes assume in any particular culture or society. Therefore, gender through these meanings organizes them as masculine or feminine and projects these meanings and their regulations onto the body. Therefore, sex is, in most cases, a biological given, gender is a social set of meanings, constructed and regulated and as Simone de Beauvoir famously says *One is not born but becomes a woman*.<sup>8</sup> In a conversation with the artist at her home<sup>9</sup> we talked about the concept of femininity and what that was as an essence. In our discussion O’Donnell said that the work asked ‘how can we know it?’ and ‘why are we hemmed in?’ The field of psychoanalysis in the Freudian and Lacanian mode hold that we must be sexed long before we enter within a linguistic system in order to become a speaking subject. The subject is formed through a process of subjection to sexual difference. The feminine is therefore outside of this order, it is unknowable and unspeakable, and its projection is managed and contained by the patriarchal ordering systems. This idea of ‘difference’ however opens a space for the recognition of another’s specificity and it is within this bind of ‘knowing it’ and being ‘hemmed in’ that another possibility co-emerges. Marina Warner in her book *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the female Form* (1996) calls for the powerful strategy of considering “female as sign.” She argues;

*In our use of the female as sign, in text and image, we need to generate a philosophy of possibilities, not reaction; to adapt the convergence of linguistic gender and the feminine to expand our consciousness of one another, and an understanding of the female, not limit the areas of search, experiment and inquiry.... That broadening can come only through the creative energy of imaginative empathy, to draw us into the subject of a figure, make us feel inside the body on whose exterior we have until now scribbled the meanings we wanted.*<sup>10</sup>

Trinh Minh-Ha also argues that;

*Difference is not otherness [...] Difference always implies the interdependency of these two-sided feminist gestures: that of affirming ‘I am like you’ while pointing insistently to the difference; and that of reminding ‘I am different’ while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at.*<sup>11</sup>

It is this borderline of feminine difference that O’Donnell’s work is located as an unsettling challenge to

6 PROCESSIONS, produced by Artichoke and commissioned by 14-18 NOW, was a lively, positive and emotional celebration of the centenary suffrage. Further information at <https://www.1418now.org.uk/commissions/processions/>

7 Pollock, Does Art Think? 131, in relation to the theorisations of Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger. Pollock, Griselda. “Does Art Think? How Can We Think The Feminine, Aesthetically?” *Art and Thought*, ed. Dana Arnold and Margaret Iverson. Oxford, Malden, Melbourne and Berlin: Blackwell, 2003, 129-155.

8 de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*, London: Vintage, 1997, c1949.

9 19<sup>th</sup> December 2018

10 Warner, Marina. *Monuments and Maidens*. London: Vintage, 1996, 332.

11 T. Minh-Ha, Trinh. *When the Moon Waxes Red*, Routledge, New York, 1991, 152.



the means by which meaning is made and its real-life everyday implications.<sup>12</sup>

In the first work I will discuss here, *Crossing Permissions, Art Centre Ongoing, Tokyo, February 2018* (see illustrations above) O’Donnell interrogates one of the most potent and ideal female signs, the most sacred maternal body of the Virgin Mary. The female allegory has long been in use as an icon from the early Christian period to the Renaissance and in more modern times and it is a particularly potent trope in and of Ireland through literary and visual formations. The representational form of this figure echoes across many manifestations and names, from Liberty, Cathleen, Hibernia, the Virgin Mary and Mother Ireland. These figures have powerful socio-political and religious connotations and all can be located to fix identity to one or multiple political or religious ideologies. They are the sign ‘Woman’ in particular historical moments and the most potent and repetitious image of the Virgin and Mother Ireland have permeated many aspects of visual representation in the last hundred and fifty years in Ireland.<sup>13</sup> They are powerful tropes, but these are not positive and powerful figures of liberation and equality. These are phallic women, strict instructors and keepers of a repressive moral code, the signification of women as passive to masculine potency, activity, power and control.<sup>14</sup> This is in fact enshrined in the Irish Constitution enacted in 1937 and its subsequent amendments.<sup>15</sup>

The central image is a direct reference to the iconic Virgin Mother and Child. O’Donnell, a woman who has not yet given birth, holds a young Japanese child in her lap. O’Donnell’s partner is Japanese and one can only imagine the personal signification of this work for her. However, the work cannot itself be read in isolation as it is part of a larger installation which pulls apart the ideological and political structures at play in the sign. Menstruation drawings on rice paper line part of the installation. Accompanying this are two digital video installations, one documenting the *International Women’s Day March* in Shibuya Tokyo (2018) and the second titled *Women’s Gathering* (2018) which consists of the artist herself and Japanese creative and professional women communally gathering over food. The film is highly edited and in fact only captures the moments individually or collectively when the women laugh out loud. This is the heart of one of the main critical and discursive trajectories in the broader body of the work; ‘the power of laughter is the power of women’. Outside the specificity of language, laughter is an

12 Too long to discuss in detail here, this work resonates alongside a distinguished line of feminist artists, writers and thinkers who have endeavoured to open up this terrain of possibilities.

13 Most villages have a grotto to the Virgin Mary and Mother Ireland was emblematically printed on the one-pound note of the Republic of Ireland’s currency. Grottos for the Virgin Mary and images of Mother Ireland in Republican murals can also be found in the urban environments of Northern Ireland.

14 It is important to acknowledge here the significant contribution of Belinda Loftus’ writings to this discussion. In *Mirrors: William III & Mother Ireland* (Belfast: Picture Press, 1990) Loftus historically examines the relatively fixed representational notion of masculinity in and about the island of Ireland though her close examination of the figure of William of Orange who appears predominantly in Loyalist Murals. Loftus argues that this is in stark contrast to the unfixed and metamorphosing notions of femininity that feature in visual representation across the island historically. Loftus’ study focuses particularly on republican murals where she traces this shift historically through the notion of Mother Ireland. Loftus finds that the unfixed nature of this representation can be seen as the appropriation of the notion of femininity to serve a particular patriarchal political ideology for a specific purpose.

15 Murphy, Paula. “Madonna and Maiden, Mistress and Mother, Woman as Symbol of Ireland and Spirit of the Nation”, *When Time Began to Rant and Rage – Figurative Painting from Twentieth-Century Ireland*. James Christen Steward. ed. London: Merrell Holberton, 1998, 90.

externalising vibration to the unspeaking body and it is a vocalisation that reaches out and translates across social, cultural and linguistic specificities. It is a contagious and communal synchronicity that is defiant of linguistic order and its regulating codes. In an adjoining installation space, empty food wrappers, devoid of their out of date contents, line the communal eating area. The food, although out of date, was despite this quite edible and nourishing. The narrative at play in this work is one of absence and of presence, rice paper stained with menstrual blood tells of a potential pregnancy unrealised, while the emptied out of date wrappers, once full of still edible food, speaks of abundance and nourishment with still potential in store. The work can be seen along with what Rosemary Betterton has argued as “maternal paradigms have been disrupted and transformed”.<sup>16</sup> Utilising Judith Butler’s terms, she argues “[d]isjunctions occur within maternal representation that expose those ideals and produce fissures in them; these can, in Judith Butler’s terms, become ‘an enabling disruption’ to the norm.”<sup>17</sup>

Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger’s work as an artist, psychoanalyst and feminist theorist in the ‘post-Lacanian mode’ concerns the feminine at an abstract level which she develops as having possibilities of representation in the matrixial dimension of subjectivity.<sup>18</sup> Judith Butler notes “[s]he is, I think, asking us to reformulate the very relation between the subject and its other, and to ask what precedes this encounter in which the phallus seeks to confirm its status, where the feminine acts only as a faulty mirror...”.<sup>19</sup> The implications of these theories radically rethinks subjectivity as we look/listen/feel behind/beyond/before Butler’s termed faulty mirror and to challenge but not displace, pass or go beside the castration principle as the only means to assume subjectivity.

Ettinger challenges Lacan’s hypothesis that the phallus is a neutral or the only signifier in the Symbolic by which subjectivity can be formed via the castration cut in the field of desire. She argues that there are many non-phallic spaces in the Symbolic and that there are other routes/passageways to make meaning. However, Ettinger is primarily concerned with one of these spaces, which she has gleaned and traced through radically new symbolic filters and processes which she has called the Matrix. This is not a pre-symbolic space, but a sub-symbolic space where the feminine can be found in the expanded symbolic.<sup>20</sup> She defines this unconscious symbolic space – the concept of the Matrix as:

*The matrix is a pre-natal symbolic space. The Several comes before the One. Right from the moment in which we may speak about the subject we might also speak of an enlarged subjectivity. In the Matrix a meeting occurs between the co-emerging I and the unknown non-I. Each one neither assimilates nor rejects the other and their energy consists neither in fusion nor in repulsion, but in continual re-adjustment of distances, a continual negotiation of separateness and distances within togetherness or proximity. Matrix is a zone of encounter between the most intimate and the most distanced unknown. Its most internal is an outer limit, and the limits themselves are flexible and variable. They are potential or virtual thresholds.<sup>21</sup>*

It is a significant shift in theorisation of subjectivity in the Lacanian mode, which postulates that one is fashioned through its consumption, opposition or destruction of its other. This is instead a matrixial subjectivity – a psychic unconscious space which is not structured in the binary terms or lends itself

to the dominant and negated polarity of sexual, colonial or social difference.<sup>22</sup> What Ettinger is arguing instead is that the “intra-uterine meeting” of mother and foetus and foetus and mother in the late periods of gestation is a meeting – neither in opposition or destruction – between the *non-I* and *I*. Instead it is “a partner in difference” and it is this relational oscillation in co-existence between meeting and distance, in recognition without knowing – neither rejecting nor assimilating.<sup>23</sup> This is a feminine dimension of the Symbolic, but it is not exclusively so, men and women both have access to this realm, although women have “double access” regardless of whether they are mothers or not.<sup>24</sup>

It is important to clarify that the dangers of these theories and practices being reduced to a concept that forwards the rights of the prenatal child over the mother’s body and therefore easily re-appropriated by “essentialist ideology”, however, Ettinger makes it clear that this is not what her hypothesis is.<sup>25</sup> This theory, she argues, resists and disperses the “phallic seizure” and “essentializing of women’s bodies” which holds that the prenatal child is an independent and “unitary subject” because she argues that “[f] or the point of view of the matrixial, it makes no sense to speculate on an unborn infants needs separately from the mother-to-be’s body/trauma/phantasy/desire complexity.”<sup>26</sup> Griselda Pollock also addresses these charges of essentialism in a recent introduction to the writings and creative practice of Ettinger where Pollock acknowledges that there is a great resistance in critical feminist theory to the notion of feminine-reproductive corpo-Real.<sup>27</sup> This is because it is considered and feared to be an essentialist notion of bodily womanliness therefore reinforcing patriarchal constructs along the oppositional binary divisions.<sup>28</sup> Pollock urges us however, and I would agree, that we must break out of this frame of thinking and transcend/question the Lacanian notion (and the socio-political and cultural emphasis) of “phallic logic” which negates the Woman/Other/Thing to a meaningless/beyondness/Otherness value of lack.<sup>29</sup> What these concepts emphasize is a rethinking of subjectivity on an abstract and theoretical level as a shared investment of *I* and *non-I* of processes within difference to thereby reconsidering as Griselda Pollock argues the relationship between artwork and viewer as “aesthetic encounters” and the “ethical and political relations between stranger, foreign, irreducible elements of other-ness in our encounters with human and even non-human events in the world”.<sup>30</sup>

Lacan’s theorisation of subjectivity, via the signifier the Phallus, proposes that the linguistic laws of metaphor and metonymy<sup>31</sup> are the means by which meaning is made by a subject. As discussed above, the Matrix is neither a substitute for nor a destruction of the Phallus as signifier, but an expansion of the Symbolic to accommodate other signifiers. Taking this therefore to its next logical step in theorisation, Ettinger proposes that the process by which meaning is made in the Matrixial stratum of subjectivity occurs via processes of joint investment or the process which she terms *Metramorphosis*.<sup>32</sup> This can be understood as not being the substitution of the linguistic laws of metaphor and metonymy, but instead of something which is alongside it as an ongoing process of negotiation, navigation and manoeuvring

16 Betterton, Rosemary. *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 2014, 5.

17 *ibid*.

18 This has had tremendous repercussions for critical feminist interrogation within the fields of psychoanalysis, cultural studies, sociology, literary studies, postcolonial studies and the examinations and/or practices of visual representation.

19 Please see Roy Boyne’s introduction to Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger’s work in the essay “Uterine Self-understanding and the Indispensable Other” which also introduces an important collection of essays in *Theory, Culture & Society* 21.1 (2004): 1-3, from which this quote by Butler is taken. Butler, Judith, “Bracha’s Eurydice” in *Theory, Culture & Society* 21.1 (2004): 95-100, p. 98.

20 Ettinger, Bracha Lichtenberg. “Matrix: Beyond the Phallus.” *Women’s Art Magazine*. 56 (1994): 14.

21 Ettinger, Bracha Lichtenberg. “Woman – Other – Thing: A matrixial\* touch.” *Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger: Matrix – Borderlines*. Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1993, 12.

22 Pollock, Griselda. “Matrix : Beyond the Phallus.” *Women’s Art Magazine*. 56 (1994): 12.

23 *ibid*.

24 Ettinger “Weaving a Woman Artist With-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event” *Theory, Culture & Society* 21.1 (2004): 77

In the essay “Weaving a Woman Artist With-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event” *Theory, Culture & Society* 21.1 (2004): 69-93, Ettinger considers this access for men and women. 77.

25 In the essays Ettinger, Bracha Lichtenberg. “Trauma and Beauty Trans-Subjectivity in Art.” *n.paradoxa*. 3 (1999): 15-23. and Ettinger, Bracha Lichtenberg. “Weaving a Woman Artist With-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event.” *Theory, Culture & Society*. 21.1 (2004): 69-93.

26 *ibid*.

27 Pollock, Griselda. “Thinking the feminine; introduction to Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger.” *Theory, Culture and Society*. 21.1. October (2003): 5-65.

28 *ibid*, 39.

29 *ibid*, 40.

30 *ibid*, 7.

31 These laws are discussed in detail below. But can be described here briefly as the linguistic processes by which meaning is made as a passage to the Symbolic.

32 Ettinger, Bracha Lichtenberg. “Woman – Other – Thing: A matrixial\* touch.” *Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger: Matrix – Borderlines*. Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1993, 13.





in a joint or trans-subjective space, and a passageway to the Symbolic.

This takes me to the second work that I want to discuss, *Silence*, which was a performance work in Thailand (2018) (illustrations above). Staged at night, this is, as with all the others, a work of and from the body, but seen here through multiple oscillating and shifting artificial light sources that blur and shift the lines between what you see and don't see. In the work the audience are in collaboration with the artist as they hold the lights, the source of which in the darkness determines what is seen and known. At points in the documentation the audience move together in the darkness with these multiple sources of light to find their bearings as the work unfolds. In a work that involves material such as Vaseline®, rice, flour, turmeric and colour, O'Donnell at one point holds a fully inflated white balloon, and this is placed under her white tee-shirt momentarily drawing the maternal body at the latter stages of gestation. Whole, plump and as if pregnant, O'Donnell stands on a chair inscribing the word 'silence' on her inner thigh. Silence is a word that can be spoken and heard, yet it infers the absence of sound, the avoidance or absence of speaking or of making a sound, the avoidance of mentioning something and a refusal to betray a secret.<sup>33</sup> The artist takes a light source to trace the marks along her inner thigh, lingering as if to place an emphasis on the word as inscription and yet never spoken in sound. Later, in a standing squat, the balloon as gestational space is kneaded and massaged, pressed and pushed until the balloon underneath collapses with a burst and the space is lost and the silence is broken with a loud bang.

The work, I would argue, is matrixial where activating processes of metamorphosis through the collaborative yet unpredictability of the nature of the work shifts from the visible to the invisible, the known and the said to the unknown and unspeakable, back and forth, to and fro. Language and its other is the oscillating and blurring exchange here in this work and a space of encounter between that which is most intimate and familiar and most distant and unknown, is connecting, collaborating, trusting, opening up and becoming vulnerable. In a matrixial alliance between the artist and gestational space and artist and the audience, the feminine makes a sign and gives meaning in this work, the body speaks in its silence 'in of and from the feminine'.<sup>34</sup>

O'Donnell is an artist of integrity and this is forged with fiery steel determination and conviction for women's social and political rights over their direct management of their own lives and bodies. The work, both bodily and theoretically, sounds out (sometimes laughing) a possibility of what Rosemary Betterton terms 'the possibility of co-existing with(in) another [and] offers a potential model for all human relationships', where it can be said that 'from this particularly embodied knowledge it is possible to achieve an ethics of responsibility to the other'.<sup>35</sup> For O'Donnell, in these difficult social and political times, there is no other choice but to stand proudly and speak up with a responsibility to the other.

33 *The Oxford Paperback Dictionary*. (1994) c1979. 4<sup>th</sup> Edn. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 747.

34 Ettinger defines Metamorphosis in more detail in the following text and page; Ettinger, Bracha Lichtenberg. "Woman – Other – Thing: A matrixial\* touch." *Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger: Matrix – Borderlines*. Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1993, 13.

35 Betterton, Rosemary. *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 2014, 11, considering Kristeva's idea of the child's birth and the impact on the mother extracted out of her 'oneness' and 'reaching out to the other the ethical' (1986, 182).











## Art Center Ongoing, artist in residency programme, Tokyo, Japan.

Sinéad O'Donnell lives in Belfast and has been showing work nationally and internationally ever since. She creates performative work rooted in her identity, which conjures up thoughts concerning political problems and feminism. Through Flax Art Studios in Belfast, Sinéad was invited to take part in the 4th artist exchange programme, hosted by Art Center Ongoing in Kichijoji, Tokyo. Sinéad created work based on research conducted throughout her three month stay, which started in January 2018. Her residency culminated in a presentation of work in a diverse range of mediums, including: film; photography; drawing; collage; and performance.

Stepping into the exhibition space, what catches the eye first is the photographic work *Japanese Mother and Child*. Unclothed and with an infant sitting on her lap, Sinéad looks as though she is speaking tenderly to this little baby, who gazes up at her, with a sense of trust and ease. The gentle light shining through the round window embraces the two like a halo, making the image look almost religious, like a picture of the Holy Mother and Child. However, these two people share no bloodline; the imaginary picture suggests what it may have been like for Sinéad had she and her partner (an artist from Japan) been able to have children together. Waves of melancholy can drift as the years go by with the knowledge that, as a woman, the ability to get pregnant and give birth eventually come to an end.

Drawings made with menstrual blood adorn the adjacent wall. The knowledge that the ability to become pregnant and give birth eventually come to the end is addressed. Menstruation, the monthly act of releasing ova, is a kind of pregnancy and birth, as well as a message from the body that pregnancy did not take place. The drawings may be seen as a statement of commonality allowing female audiences to become involved in the work.

Following this is *International Women's Day*, a video documenting the Women's March Tokyo 2018 demonstration held in March in Shibuya, Tokyo. In comparison to the non-Japanese women on the march, who proudly held up placards and chanted in chorus, the Japanese women demonstrators did not raise their voices as much, and looked a little embarrassed as they walked timidly in line. There were some women who appeared noticeably resistant about showing up to demand more rights for themselves, which in turn made one feel the invisible walls that loom over the future of women in Japan.

The focus then moves to feminism in the Japanese art world, in the video work *Women's Gathering*. According to the caption, the video captures different women together who are all involved in art,

such as: artists; curators; writers; and students, sharing and speaking of their experiences. However, what the video actually shows is only their laughter. This video, compiling the laughing voices of women enjoying themselves, seems to be a kind of cheering song from Sinéad to the women of Japan, yet glimpses of the women's expressions suggest that opening up is not easy there either.

As the residency came to an end, a party was held to raise questions about capitalism with an Anti-Capitalist Menu, comprising of all the out-of-date foodstuff left behind in the residency lodgings by previous artists-in-residence. There, a performance was made by a Japanese artist Ayaka Ura and an Indonesian curator Syafiatudina together with Sinéad, and the many people gathered together. The performance began with the faint chime of a bell and the use of materials, such as ash, red paint, candles and flames, made it feel like a ceremony: the audience held their breath as they observed. A traditional Japanese children's song called *Takibi* (meaning "bonfire") was sung while the lyrics were written onto Sinéad's inner thighs. There was something comical in the gestures and some of the audience laughed, loosening the nervous tension of the audience. The performance was made with Sinéad half wearing a red dress, exposing the upper half of her body. Throughout the entire duration Sinéad's face was covered over by her long hair, paralleling the inability of Japanese women to show up and demand better rights.



Like an amulet of good fortune, the encouragement left by Sinéad to women who continue their practice in the Japanese art world, will surely continue to provide strength until the day life can be lived in Japan without disparity.

Sakiko Wakiya (writer based in Tokyo)





## Centro de Exposiciones Subte, Montevideo, Uruguay.

Sinéad O'Donnell performed *Crossing Permissions* in Montevideo, Uruguay, at the SUBTE Exhibition Centre. Mobilizing her body as a site of conflict, Sinéad arrived in Montevideo and began with a work process that consisted of staying in artists' homes and visiting their workshops to internalise the context of the local performance art scene, to use later as input or discursive material in her actions. She made three actions in total. Her work led me to think of the body as territory. Matter and geography, immersed in the immaterial being, inseparable from each other. As a surface exposed to the environment and as a device that enunciates the message.

Almost intuitively and with a scene full of symbolism, Sinéad started her performance. In one section of the room there was the green fabric - part of a flag that the artist used in Belfast, during the celebration of the one hundred years of women's suffrage in the United Kingdom - placed as two strips that together with the rice paper served as a base. A brick, brought from Sinéad's house in Northern Ireland, became a symbol of the epistemology of the objects. Next, Sinéad added coal and ashes extracted from the wood stove of the house of a Montevidean artist that she had visited, a representation of ordinary daily life and of the a lived moment. Finally, Sinéad introduced two balloons smelling of baby powder, a familiar odour that, to my understanding, signified the social mandate imposed on women at the time they must decide whether or not to become mothers.

All of these materials were used to facilitate a set of actions that comprised the performance. Her naked torso and breasts formed an armour, revealing to the spectators various images, questioning their passive position and forcing them to move around. Sinéad finished the performance by inviting the public to share a can of beans, which became the social devise with which Sinéad interacted with visitors. At times the audience appeared stifled or uncomfortable before the naked - yet covered in ashes - face and torso of the artist. This suggested the feeling of suffocation followed by release, "as it happens to so many women", the artist told me.

The body as an affected territory placed the personal as political. Referring to Kate Millets's book "sexual policy" and understanding the "personal" as the physical body. How one relates to the body at an individual, social, or collective level. How one acts with respect to the body, if it is experienced as a threat or a weapon, if it is taken care of or mistreated, if it is placed in the public sphere or private, is a political decision. *Crossing Permissions*, or *Cruce de Permisos* in Spanish, is a performance that refers to and questions how the women around the world created and create new landscapes of resilience as a form of empowerment and resistance within their contexts. Bodies capable of identifying and building other escape routes from the processes of demarcating territory established by those in power. Bodies capable of introducing themselves into collective spaces, and transforming them.

Valeria Piriz (artist and feminist activist based in Montevideo)











## Peras de Olmo - Ars Continua, artist in residency programme, Buenos Aires, Argentina

### *An armor made of the vulnerable On Sinéad O'Donnell's Crossing Permissions Series, in Buenos Aires.*

"... for me the chest it's like an armour, a natural body's armour (...) this is what I have, this is my body, this is what I am doing, this is my performance, this is how I make art".

Standing among the evergreen branches, wearing her lemon dress, Sinéad began to remove the dress from her torso while I placed the branches vertically, and after the gesture of touching her forehead with mine I left the space and the performance that I had just finished. Cradling the branches in her arms, she plugged her ears and concentrated on her breathing, letting sound and breathe escape as it needed to. A purple suffragette flag was initially walked on and then used as a boxing glove – this was not a violent action, rather an empowering one. A soft sort of breathe-song undulated gently with her upward punching fists.

This was followed by a moment of significant interaction with the audience. She fetched a white container from the site of the evergreens and began smearing its content onto her nude torso, inviting the audience to help her in the process. "... my body was prepared with vaseline, so that the material would stick to my skin, and to my surprise, the majority of the audience were women, but what was so fascinating is that in comparison to other audiences around the world, they really wanted to assist me to cover myself with lemon peel and share that sensory smell with me".

Lying on the suffragette flag in a Venus pose, Sinéad broke open two white paper bags, containing charcoal and ash, which stuck to her Vaseline-smeared body. The performance ended with her standing and leaning against a balloon stuck to the wall, which burst covering her with baby powder.

Sinéad O'Donnell's performance practice yields in the immediacy of familial gestures, actions and manipulation of materials that displaced from their functional cause-and-effect orbits become fragments of unsettling, yet tender live human puzzles. The performances succeed in suspending a plethora of non-verbal questions and assumptions about our culturally controlled bodies, women's experiences, vital sincerity, mortality, and art as a non-commodity, preserving this in the act itself as sense of sovereignty and shareable horizon.

An armour made of the vulnerable to flow through the tense phenomena of this world.

Graciela Ovejero Postigo. December 25 2018. Buenos Aires, Argentina.





## ATIOL, artist in residency programme, Campinas, Brazil.

In a disused quarry ('Iracemápolis'), a couple of hours drive from Campinas, Sinéad brought a selection of materials for her performance including: white rice paper; white note pads; two identical white coats; and a lemon dress. The first part of Sinéad's action was to enter the swamped earth wearing only the dress and with the Japanese rice paper in her hands. As she moved she made short pauses and plunged them into the water, then lifted and let them drain. The red/brown colour of the red clay filled pool looked like menstrual blood, especially as it dried.

Next she took the two white coats and threw them into the small pool: because of the weight, they made a lot of noise and took some time to sink. Sinéad called this piece *Red Clay Twins* as the date marked the 70th Birthday of her father who is a twin. The weight of the materials was unbearably hard and heavy and her discomfort was evident. After the immersion of her materials, she also lay in the water, this time seeming to deliver her own body to Mother Nature. The red clay in the water dyed her skin just as it had previously dyed the paper and coats. As it grew dark she worked with two chargeable lamps. Only fragments of her body could be seen from the water. The darkness framed the composition, now formed from the reflections of the lights in the water as she swung them to and fro.

At her exhibition in the gallery she presented the materials from the performance – the stained rice paper which looked like dried menstrual blood, the coats (now dry) placed either side of a table and other debris of the red clay on top of the table. Wearing the lemon dress that had been stained by the red clay, Sinéad talked to the audience, explaining her previous performance and this new one. She ate from a tin of baked beans (her comfort food) and sitting at the table covered her face with a piece of black paper while holding a branch behind her head to reference a deer. She invited the audience to take her place and repeat this action, before serving Irish coffees and disappearing. The end of the action was never communicated to us and the visitors continued to have coffee in the room for at least thirty minutes after she left.

Camillat and Mathias Reis (artists based in Campinas, Brazil)











## Undisclosed Territories # 11, Solo, Indonesia. 2018

### *Consumption*

Food does more than fill the belly. It nourishes both the body and the soul. Hence this year's theme for Undisclosed Territory #11, a performance art festival founded and organised by performance artist Melati Suryodarmo. 'We Are What We Eat,' an idiomatic phrase, invited the participating artists to use food as a material and expression in their performances.

*Comfort* was the second performance on the 7 x 7 metre concrete platform on the evening of 6 November 2018 at Studio Plesungan, Solo, Indonesia. With her right hand firmly grasping the handle of a broom, O'Donnell stormed onto the concrete platform. The artist performing before her, Hanif Alghafary, had made such a mess: white kerupuk kampung (Indonesian tapioca crackers) crumbs had been used to draw a circle on the platform's centre, which was topped by a mountain of whole kerupuk kampung in the middle.

However, instead of using it to sweep, the broom was quickly abandoned and put to one side of the platform. O'Donnell picked up the broom three times throughout her twenty minute performance that evening, but never once was it to sweep, but always merely to put it down again. A white dinner plate with the word KELAPARAN, Indonesian for "starving," written on it in red ink was nestled on the kerupuk mountain that Hanif left behind. Two palm-sized bags of white rice and white flour respectively flanked the plate. Thus the stage was set: at the peak of food abundance, represented by Asian and European food staples and the everyday snack of the Indonesian people, an empty plate shines like a white flag of surrender, a cry for help to feed.

O'Donnell's staging, read in relation to her biographical account, narrates an individual starving in the midst of abundance. In very literal terms, of course, the kerupuk, flour and raw white rice were not edible. The kerupuk has been spread all over the floor and stepped on by Hanif and O'Donnell. Both flour and rice need to be cooked before they can be consumed. However, the irony lies in the state of starvation in the midst of plenty, not unlike O'Donnell's early blindness to food choices other than potatoes.

There is an element of violence here that is almost inexplicable, a question working both literally in general terms and metaphorically in emotional terms on how starvation can still occur in this time where more food than ever is being produced and people are more connected than ever through transport and technology. When she broke through the bags of rice and flour and poured them upon her sticky, Vaseline smeared body, they adhered to her skin and clothes, but slid off the empty plate that continued to accuse in bold, red words.

The almost melodious sound of the rice hitting the plate reminded me of some of her earliest performances in 1999 and 2000. In these performances, the nude O'Donnell surrounded herself with porcelain plates, breaking them into pieces loudly with a mullet. In *Domestic Engineering* (2009), she performed again with plates, this time breaking them against each other. In *Comfort*, the sound of the plate was softer, less jarring and the plate remained whole at the end. This time, there were no white porcelain shards littering the floor, only white rice grains and white kerupuk crumbs, food items that are not edible and could not fulfil their function as fulfilment in any way. In *Comfort*, the break may not register upon the material of the plate, but the plate still bleeds blood red, KELAPARAN.

Chloe Ho (Singaporean performance art archivist and researcher based in Australia)









## List of illustrations

Images in order of appearance

Front cover: *Rain dance*, MAG artist studios, Montevideo, Uruguay. 2018.

Pg 3: *Rain dance*, MAG artist studios, Montevideo, Uruguay. 2018.

Pg 5: *Japanese mother and child*, Tokyo, Japan. 2018.

Pg 8: *Crossing Permissions*, Art Center Ongoing Gallery, Tokyo, Japan. 2018.

Pg 8: *Japanese mother and child*, Tokyo, Japan. 2018.

Pg 8: *Crossing Permissions*, Art Center Ongoing Gallery, Tokyo, Japan. 2018.

Pg 11: *Silence*, Rebel Art Space, Bangkok, Thailand. 2018.

Pg 12: *Silence*, Rebel Art Space, Bangkok, Thailand. 2018.

Pg 13: *Crossing Permissions*, Art Center Ongoing Gallery, Tokyo, Japan. 2018.

Pg 15: *International Women's Day*, Tokyo, Japan. 2018. (Video still)

Pg 15: *Women's gathering; the power of laughter is the power of women*. 2018. (Video still)

Pg 16: *Crossing Permissions*, Art Center Ongoing Gallery, Tokyo, Japan. 2018.

Pg 17: *Crossing Permissions*, Centro de Exposiciones Subte, Montevideo, Uruguay. 2018. (Video still)

Pg 19: *Anonymous Force*, Peras de Olmo - Ars Continua, Buenos Aires, Argentina. 2018.

Pg 21: *Anonymous Force*, Peras de Olmo - Ars Continua, Buenos Aires, Argentina. 2018.

Pg 23: *Red Clay Twins*, ATIOL, Campinas, Brazil. 2018.

Pg 23: *Crossing Permissions*, ATIOL, Campinas, Brazil. 2018.

Pg 24: *Rain dance*, ATIOL, Campinas, Brazil. 2018. ( Video Still)

Pg 25: *Yemaya*, Montevideo, Uruguay. 2018.

Pg 27: *Comfort*, Undisclosed Territories # 11, Solo, Indonesia. 2018.

Pg 29: *Comfort*, Undisclosed Territories # 11, Solo, Indonesia. 2018.

Pg 30: *Comfort*, Undisclosed Territories # 11, Solo, Indonesia. 2018.

Pg 31: *Little Flower*, Responding International Performance Art Festival, Fukushima, Japan. 2018. (Video Still)

## Acknowledgements

Clemente Padin; Ana Aristimuño de Olivera; Bruno Mesa; Manuela Aldabe Toribio ; Mariana Picart Motuzas; Valeria Piriz; Rulfo Alvarez; Adriana Escoto; Elena Da Silva; Centro de Exposiciones Subte; MAG artist studios; Graciela Ovejero Postigo; Hamid Dayani; Gustavo Solar; Peras de Olmo - Ars Continua; Camilla Torres; Cecilia Stelini; Mathias Reis; Lea Moraes ; Mateus Stelini; ATIAL 609; Art Center Ongoing; Art Center Ongoing collective; Responding International Performance Art Festival; NIPAF Performance Art Festival; Lucky Happy Studio; Tana Studio; Atelier Boice; Special feeling studio; The National Museum of Art (MOAO); Yusuke Saito; Nozomu Ogawa; Kazuko Ogawa; Toshiko Endo; Takafumi Sakanaka; Emi Yoshida; Sota Sakanaka; Ayaka Ura; Syafiatudina; Nagahata Tomohiro; Sakiko Wakiya; Sakiko Yamaoka; Ito Tari; Seiji Shimoda; May Adachi; Haruka Saito; Ryo Ikeda; Flax Art Studios; Golden Thread Gallery; Millennium Court Arts Centre; Shiro Masuyama; Hugh O'Donnell; Aaron Woolard; Deirdre Robb; George Robb; Sarah McAvera; Peter Richards; Léann Herlihy; Una Walker; Brian McAvera; Jackie Barker; Johnny Cordner; Hazel Boland; Dermot Burns; Lisa Finnegan; Chérie Driver; Rachel Rankin; Boris Nieslony; Brian Connolly; University of Atypical; Rebel Art Space & Residency; Vasan Sitthiket; Sai Wannaphon ; Na Wattana; Youenmo Koo; Manasikarn Sirmuangkhala; Anucha Hemmala; Anuchit Hemmala; Net Swaddee; Chanchai Chua; Chloe Ho; Melati Suryodarmo; Undisclosed territory # 11 Performance Art Festival; Studio Plesungan; Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

Video:

Yusuke Saito; Gabriel Cabrera; Mariana Picart Motuzas; Mario Manriquez; Mathias Reis; Seiko Kitayama; Rachel Rankin.

Photography:

Maki Taguchi; Takafumi Sakanaka; Manuela Aldabe Toribio; Mario Manriquez; Juan Wiens; Eva Semino; Camillat; Net Swaddee; Studio Plesungan.

Translations:

Emily Kyoko Snowden; Cecilia Cabrera; Jessica Fairfax Hirst; Eliu Almonte; Graciela Ovejero Postigo; Camillat e Mathias Reis.

For Andrea, Anna, Chloe, Dell, Jennifer, Julie, Nicole, Pauline, Pippa & Rosanne.

